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SUBJECT: THE SDKU DIVORCE

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Weiser for reason 1.4b.

1. (C) Summary: Former Defense Minister Ivan Simko's new "Free Forum" party is the product of both a personality conflict and a struggle for power with PM Dzurinda. However, Simko's indecision about making a complete break from the SDKU and its government program lost him momentum. Coalition parties were ready to accept him as a partner, but he threw away the opportunity with his demand that Dzurinda step down. Simko is no longer a strong competitor on the political scene.

2. (C) Dzurinda did not extend an olive branch to Simko. This political calculation was clever in one way, but counterproductive in another. Simko is no longer a threat to Dzurinda within the SDKU, nor is Simko with his fledgling party a threat to Dzurinda on the larger political scene. However, Dzurinda now leads a minority government, and it will be much harder to get legislation passed through parliament. Dzurinda made political mistakes in late 2003, but seems to have learned from his errors. The coalition government will likely stay in office to the end of its term, and continue to push through its aggressive reform agenda. End summary.

A Brief History of the SDKU and Recent Events

3. (C) As told to P/E Chief by SDKU insider Frantisek Stano (who managed the 2002 parliamentary election campaign and has known Simko and Dzurinda for a decade since they were in KDH together), the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU) party was the brainchild of Ivan Simko. Dissatisfied under the leadership of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) in the mid-1990's, he envisioned an enlightened modern party that would meld strong values with modern business principles. Simko's intellectual capacity and organizational ability were matched by Mikulas Dzurinda's charisma, and when the group split from KDH, it was clear that Dzurinda would be the public face and billboard "leader," and Simko would run the party behind the scenes. This arrangement worked well for several years. According to Kamil Homola (Director of SDKU's central office, presidential campaign manager for FM Kukan, and 25-year old nominee for "young politicians" IV program in 2004), the trouble between Dzurinda and Simko began at the 2002 party congress, when Simko "shocked" Dzurinda by tossing his hat into the ring for leadership of the SDKU. Dzurinda won, but was miffed, and there has been tension ever since.

4. (C) Simko told DCM and P/E chief that the trouble began only in the fall of 2003. He said Dzurinda's announcement of the "skupinka" or little group harming Slovakia's interests made clear his misuse of the Slovak Information Service (SIS). Furthermore, Dzurinda's decision to fire National Security Office (NBU) chief Jan Mojzis without consulting cabinet members and party leaders showed a new leadership style unpalatable to many in the SDKU. To summarize four months of press stories, Simko refused to support the sacking of Mojzis, was fired as Defense Minister and Deputy SDKU chairman, formed the "Free Forum Platform" as a movement for a "return to values" within the SDKU, and in January finalized the divorce with Dzurinda by registering "Free Forum" as a new political party with 7 MPs. He was invited to join the coalition, but refused to do so as long as Dzurinda remained Prime Minister. However, he vowed to support the government program of reform.

What Motivates Simko?

5. (C) Both Stano and Homola characterized Simko as a respected politician who had a grand vision, but was growing frustrated with his relative lack of power in what he viewed as "his" party. Stano said that Simko can't stand to be number two, but doesn't have the stamina or charisma to be number one. He has good ideas, but doesn't know how to work hard, for example pounding the pavement for votes. Homola professed admiration for Simko, his former political science professor who got him his SDKU job, but said his ego blocked his judgment in this case. Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) Secretary General Peter Voros and SMK Spokesperson Livia

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Pokstaller lamented that Simko's primary motivation at this point is his personal feud with Dzurinda, which he puts ahead

of national interests.

16. (C) Simko's indecision on how cleanly to make the break lost him momentum. He astounded leaders of the KDH, SMK, and ANO, who were fully prepared to offer him a seat as the fifth member of the governing coalition, by refusing to join as long as Dzurinda remains prime minister. On the other hand, he has said both publicly and privately that he will support the government's reform agenda. (He recently back-tracked by opposing the coalition's proposed education reforms.) He disappointed Smer and other opposition parties by refusing to support early elections. Politicians and the public are left scratching their heads and asking, "What does Simko want?"

Simko has laudable goals such as legislating reforms in the SIS and NBU, strengthening parliamentary oversight, and keeping defense reform on track. However, apart from this legislative list, he seems to be drifting without a compass.

17. (C) Fellow MP's view Simko as an introvert who lacks the spark to lift his new party off the ground. It is doubtful that he can build yet another political party in Slovakia's already-saturated field. We asked Simko point-blank how he planned to win support and differentiate himself from the SDKU of Dzurinda. He answered, "We need a plan."

What Motivates Dzurinda?

18. (C) According to Stano, Dzurinda evaluates people as individuals, rather than as members of a team. Individuals that he trusts, such as his controversial advisor Sergei Michalic, can do anything. Individual grudges, however, go deep and last long. Stano gave as an example Dzurinda's feeling of betrayal when Jan Figel refused to leave the KDH with Dzurinda and Simko, which almost cost Figel an appointment as Slovakia's EU Commissioner. Homola described Dzurinda's favoritism for youthful energy, saying the first question he asked about new employees was, "How old is he?" Stano said that Dzurinda resents being told directly what he should do, particularly by foreign governments, and sometimes does the opposite just to prove he can. On the flip side, Dzurinda advisor and pollster Tatiana Rosova said Dzurinda considers his legacy to be integration of Slovakia into NATO and the EU, so he obviously cares very much what foreign governments think of him.

19. (C) In November, Rosova told P/E chief that Dzurinda realized coalition politics were getting out of hand, and he was toning down his rhetoric towards other politicians, and especially in the press. Rosova said SDKU's falling numbers in the polls did not indicate a defection of voters to other parties but to "undecided," due to disenchantment with party strife. Homola said when the going got tough and Bratislava looked bleak, Dzurinda started calling SDKU leaders in the regions to mobilize support. Dzurinda's strategy to return to his previous "consultative" leadership style, to ignore Simko, and to stop public battles seems to have paid off. Opinion polls published in January show SDKU's numbers still low, but on the rise again.

Coalition Partners Unhappy, but Muddling Through

10. (C) All coalition partners are upset to be in a minority government. But they are determined to stick it out through the end of their term, with the support of defectors from other parties, independent MPs, and the Free Forum. None profess support for early elections. Voros and Pokstaller of the SMK said that Simko is not a real player and he took with him only "lackluster MP's." SMK believes Simko was pushed by others within Free Forum to call for Dzurinda's dismissal, because he was not so radical in private talks with SMK chair Bela Bugar. KDH MP and presidential candidate Frantisek Miklosko gushed to P/E chief, "I like Dzurinda, I really do. It's a shame he let things deteriorate so far. His old style of consulting everyone before making a decision was better." KDH has refrained from public comment and is watching with some pleasure as the former "betrayers" of KDH fight with each other. With party leader Pavol Rusko safely ensconced in the Ministry of Economy, ANO sided early with Dzurinda.

Comment

11. (C) Constitutionally and under the coalition agreement, the PM was in his full right to fire a cabinet minister from his party who had lost his trust. Simko's struggle against Dzurinda for power within the SDKU was probably as much a factor in his removal as his unwillingness to go along with sacking Mojzis. When Simko first created the "Free Forum Platform," said Homola, Dzurinda offered to discuss Free Forum's complaints at a May 2004 party congress--essentially dismissing Simko for 6 months. Dzurinda did not hold out an olive branch to Simko. Dzurinda's calculation was clever in a way, stupid in another. Simko is no longer a threat to Dzurinda within the SDKU, nor is Simko with his fledgling party a threat to Dzurinda on the larger political scene. However, it will be much harder work now to get legislation

passed through parliament. Dzurinda made political mistakes in late 2003, but seems to have learned from his errors. The coalition government will likely stay in office to the end of its term, and not only survive, but continue to push through one of the most aggressive and successful reform agendas in Central Europe.
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